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Chairman: Mr. Loedel ..... (Uruguay)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Agenda item 83: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
(A/58/13, A/58/13/Add.1, A/58/13/Corr.1, A/58/119, A/58/205, A/58/206, A/58/256, A/58/339 and A/58/450)

1. **Mr. Hansen** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)), presenting the UNRWA report for the period 1 July 2002 - 30 June 2003 (A/58/13), stated that since September 2000, the Agency had been facing serious difficulties in alleviating the effects of the intifada on Palestine refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while continuing to provide its services for Palestine refugees established in its three other zones of operation: the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Jordan.

2. UNRWA provided educational, health and social services, and ran a microfinancing and microenterprise programme. Education was its largest programme: it was administering 651 schools providing basic education to 490,000 students. Although classrooms were overcrowded as a result of continuous demographic pressure, the Agency prided itself on the quality of the programme, although chronic lack of funding had led to a deterioration of results. The health programme, which focused on primary health care and required an adequate and sustainable level of investment, had made management reforms in the areas of information, hospital management and medicine supply. The Agency also aimed to serve the needs of the most vulnerable refugee groups through social and relief services. The Special Hardship Programme was facing growing demand because of the difficult situation existing in Jordan, restrictions on the employment of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the crisis in the Occupied Palestine Territories. The financial situation of the General Fund meant that the reconstruction of housing was wholly reliant on extrabudgetary contributions. The microfinancing and microenterprise programme had grown enormously and had extended its activities to Jordan and Syria, although in the occupied territory it had been hindered by the steady worsening of the economic situation.

3. The economic situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories had continued to deteriorate during the reporting period: gross national income had fallen by 38 per cent since 1999; over 30 per cent of the active population were unemployed; some 200,000 jobs had been lost in Israel and in the occupied Palestine territory; and about 60 per cent of the Palestinian population was living below the poverty line. Food continued to be distributed to roughly 127,000 families in Gaza and 90,000 on the West Bank, although in smaller quantities because the Agency had only obtained half of the emergency funding requested. The International Committee of the Red Cross had been forced to discontinue its food aid programme for lack of resources, which could only increase the burden carried by the Agency in terms of food assistance. Emergency employment had been provided to 41,000 Palestinian refugees, and short-term employment for 250,000 people, nonetheless, many of those jobs had had to be discontinued for lack of funding. There had been a substantial increase in the demolition of refugee housing on the Gaza Strip throughout the past year, and, although major projects were underway, the Agency could not build houses to match the rate at which they were being destroyed.

4. For years, the Agency's precarious financial situation had been preventing it from dealing with the increases numbers of refugees to whom it was committed, for which reason it had made a number of reforms that had significantly enhanced its effectiveness. On the other hand, the various austerity measures that had been forced upon it over the years had undermined the investments made. The new Staff Rules of 1999 entailed a drop in wages and serious problems in attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff. With regard to the General Fund, UNRWA had been dealing systematically with a lack of operating capital and a precarious cash flow situation that had put the payroll at risk. This year, for the first time, the Agency was not facing a cash shortfall, thanks to a slight increase in income arising from the appreciation of the euro against the dollar and substantial value-added-tax reimbursements made by the Palestinian Authority. In addition, major assistance had come from cash contributions from the European Commission, which had established an annual increase of 5 per cent in its multiyear contribution commitment, and also from various countries that had increased their

contributions to the General Fund. That slight improvement in the general financial situation of UNRWA needed to be channelled into a strategy for restoring the quality of its services. The emergency appeal had revealed signs of donor fatigue, and the response was diminishing despite increased needs, leading to cutbacks in food distributions and other necessary activities. Refugees were increasingly reliant on UNRWA, given the retrenchment of other international agencies and the decrease in funds collected by local charity organizations.

5. The Agency maintained good working relations with Syria, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. In Lebanon, the Agency was grateful for a more constructive government attitude towards its work and the treatment of Palestinian refugees. The main problem, however, was the fulfilment of its mandate in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Military operations, internal and external closures, and the denial of visas and permits had continued to seriously disrupt the Agency's work. The Israeli defence forces continued to ignore all the Agency's privileges and immunities, and their incursions had caused destruction of its equipment in schools and training and health centres. Following a suicide attack perpetrated in Tel Aviv in May 2003, the Israeli authorities had imposed tight restrictions on the movement of UNRWA international personnel in the Gaza Strip. During the reporting period, six of the Agency's personnel had died, one of them at the hands of an Israeli sniper whilst inside a clearly marked UNRWA area. It was worth recalling that personnel working in the Agency's zone were the only United Nations staff on the ground that were not receiving hazard pay. In all likelihood, the separation barrier being built on the West Bank would represent a major additional obstacle to the Agency's work.

6. UNRWA was reviewing its current situation and considering its medium-term challenges, with a view to designing a strategy for the coming years to maintain its infrastructure and services at appropriate levels. In support of that process, it had accepted an invitation from the Government of Switzerland to host a special conference of the Agency's main donors and host countries in June 2004. Intensive preparations were ongoing with a view to reviving support for UNRWA among the international community and to establish a forum to debate the problems facing the Agency in the years to come.

7. **Mr. Frydenlund** (Norway), Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, presented the report of the Working Group (A/S8/4S0), which had been observing with concern the Agency's difficulties over last year, particularly its dire financial situation. It was international community's responsibility to ensure that UNRWA services were maintained at an acceptable level, in both quantity and quality, with funding that matched the natural growth of the refugee population. The Working Group recommended that the Agency improve the management of special projects, including preparation of proposals, draft budget and viability evaluation.

8. The Working Group recognized that UNRWA had made substantial progress in reducing the effects of the structural deficit of previous years. It lauded the Commissioner-General and all UNRWA personnel for their unstinting efforts to maintain the Agency's basic services despite resource constraints. It also praised the Commissioner-General for his efforts to obtain funds, keep the main donors and authorities of host countries informed and interested, seek new sources of support and financing, and attempt to widen the donor base.

9. The Working Group was alarmed by the adverse effects of the austerity measures on the Agency's humanitarian activities; it noted with concern that expenditure per refugee had fallen from an average of US$200 per year in the 1970s to under US$70 in the most recent decade.

10. The refugee problem was closely related to a political problem that had arisen over half a century ago, which it was essential to resolve once and for all in accordance with United Nations resolutions. Nonetheless, the current problems of refugees were humanitarian, and responsibility for addressing them needed to be shared by the international community. UNRWA services had to be seen as the minimum necessary for refugees to live productive lives. Any further cutback in services would not only unfairly deprive them of the minimum support to which they were entitled, but could also destabilize the entire region.

11. In order to provide UNRWA with a solid financial base, the Working Group urged all governments to contribute to its budget, to increase its amount and make timely payments; and it called on Governments to review the issue of special contributions to accumulate working capital so that UNRWA services

could be maintained without interruption and services that had been suspended as a result of austerity measures could be re-established, and to ensure that donor support for emergency or special programmes did not involve a reduction or diversion of contributions to the Agency's ordinary programme.

12. **Ms. Nasser** (Palestinian Observer) thanked the Commissioner-General for his report, and expressed to him and his staff her recognition of the efforts that were being made in a highly complex socioeconomic and political situation.

13. Palestinian refugees had been waiting for a fair solution to their tragic predicament for over half a century. Millions of people were still living in 59 refugee camps, which had only ever been intended as a temporary solution, in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Palestinian refugees, like other refugees in the world and throughout history, were entitled to return to their homes. In 1948, paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) had stressed the right of the Palestinian people to return to their homes, since then that right had been reaffirmed year after year. Palestinian refugees had pinned their hopes of being able to exercise their rights on the steadfastness of the international community; but Israel continued to refuse to take responsibility for their situation and categorically rejected their right to return to their homes, which had merely aggravated the problem.

14. The speaker also highlighted the importance of individual rights to private property, including land ownership. Israel had to recognize that Palestinian refugees, as recorded in the files of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine, were owners of 5.5 million dunums of land. The cornerstone of any fair and definitive solution to the Palestinian refugee problem required that land to be returned to its owners, or a fair compensation paid where acceptable. In that regard, modernization of the Commission's files and the UNRWA project for the registration of Palestinian refugees could help to simplify the procedures involved in such an important process. In addressing the situation of Palestinians uprooted from their land it was also important to reaffirm the right of Palestinians displaced in 1967 to return to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as first proclaimed by the Security Council in resolution 237 (1967), which should have been updated years ago in accordance with agreements reached between the parties.

15. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations reaffirmed its willingness to consolidate and rationalize the resolutions that were traditionally approved on that agenda item, without belittling their fundamental considerations, whether legal, political or humanitarian; without detaching the question of UNRWA assistance from the context in which it was operating and the situation and rights of the refugees it had to serve; and addressing the main issues clearly and logically to preserve their integrity.

16. For over 53 years, the Agency had played a valuable and indispensable role. The desperate predicament in which the Palestinian refugees were living would surely have reached catastrophic proportions if it were not for the establishment of the Agency, the assistance it provided and the tireless dedication of its staff. Given the continuous deterioration of the political, economic, social and security situation in the region, UNRWA services were necessary for the survival of many refugees.

17. The socioeconomic conditions of the Palestinian refugees remained difficult in all areas of operation, and the number of people living in situations of special hardship had increased. Conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon also remained very difficult. Furthermore, Palestinian refugees in Iraq were being affected by the crisis in that country. Those refugees satisfied the criteria specified in the UNRWA mandate, and should therefore be its responsibility. Nonetheless, the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine was grateful for the work done to alleviate their situation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations. The harsh conditions in the refugee camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were made worse by continuous Israeli military aggression. Constant Israeli violations of international law, including international humanitarian law, had seriously aggravated the situation of the Palestinian refugees, who represented nearly half of the civilian population. Thousands of refugees had had their property expropriated, had been displaced from their places of origin, and had had their belongings destroyed among the ruins of their bulldozed homes, or bundled up in desperation as they fled the attacks of the occupying forces. Once again, they had seen their lives uprooted, their security threatened, and their human dignity violated.

18. The refugee camps in the occupied Gaza Strip continued to be subjected to large-scale Israeli

incursions and military attacks, which caused major damage and destroyed housing and infrastructure. While the residents of the Yenin refugee camp were attempting to recover from the Israeli attack of April 2002, supported by a subsidy from the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent Society, the occupying forces had wreaked further damage and destruction in the camps of Rafah, Khan Younis and Bureij, among others. Israeli incursions in Rafah, which had destroyed nearly 200 homes, damaged dozens of other houses and properties, and had made over 2,000 Palestinian people homeless, had been the most recent act of widespread destruction, and constituted a serious violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Agency had responded immediately to those crises, establishing temporary shelter for homeless refugees in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank, and providing them with other forms of emergency assistance; but it had faced serious difficulties in coping with the pace of destruction caused by the occupying forces, and had been forced to draw on extrabudgetary funds.

19. Since 28 September 2000, the Israeli occupying forces had deliberately killed over 2,600 Palestinians, including children, men and women, and had wounded a further 40,000. Many of those killed and disabled as a result of the attacks were UNRWA-registered refugees. The Agency's health services had been seriously impaired by the attacks. There were also refugees among the over 6,000 Palestinians still being detained or held in Israeli prisons.

20. Israeli restrictions on the movement of people and merchandise, including humanitarian material, throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories, continued to seriously impair socioeconomic conditions among the Palestinian refugees, one of the most vulnerable population groups. Those restrictions had obstructed and often completely prevented access to places of work, schools, food and drinking water, and also to health services, resulting in a high rate of unemployment, thousands of school days lost, and high levels of malnutrition and anaemia, among other illnesses. In addition, Israel's construction of a wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, threatened to raise yet a another obstacle to the provision of services to refugees living in the area, as had been shown in Qalqilya.

21. The Israeli occupying forces had continued to obstruct the work of the Agency and other humanitarian organizations providing support to the Palestinian people, in flagrant violation of international law. In May 2003, United Nations agencies and various nongovernmental organizations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories had issued a public communiqué protesting against the severe restrictions imposed by Israel on their movements and at the disturbances caused to their programmes, including the distribution of emergency humanitarian aid.

22. The restrictions often prevented and delayed the distribution of humanitarian supplies such as food, medicines, blood and other necessary items. The Agency's vehicles were subject to inspection and suffered lengthy delays at Israeli checkpoints; and ambulances were prevented from transporting patients needing urgent attention. The Agency's vehicles had also come under fire from the occupying forces.

23. The Agency's doctors, nurses and teachers were often prevented from reaching their work places or returning to their homes. In addition, its staff had been harassed and humiliated, both physically and verbally, at Israeli checkpoints; and several had been beaten, wounded and detained. Israel had detained at least 64 staff members and had systematically denied the Agency access to them.

24. The occupying forces had even killed six of the Agency's staff, including Mr. Ian Hook, director of UNRWA projects in Yenin, who had been shot by an Israeli sniper while he was evacuating staff from a clearly identified United Nations complex in prevention of an Israeli military operation. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine condemned those assassinations and the continuing massacres of Palestinian civilians; the perpetrators should be held accountable for their crimes.

25. The Agency's facilities and equipment had also not been immune from attacks that had damaged several of their buildings, including a number of schools and training and health centres. The occupying forces had also commandeered schools and used them as bases and detention centres. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine insisted that UNRWA and other United Nations agencies should be allowed to fulfil their mandates free from harassment, intimidation, obstruction and destruction. The occupying power should comply with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, in addition to its obligations arising from the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, the

Charter of the United Nations, and its own agreement with the Agency. All restrictions on the movement of goods and Agency staff should be lifted, and compensation paid for the damage that had been caused to its facilities and equipment.

26. The situation had also imposed an additional burden on the Agency's limited resources, forcing it to focus on urgent priorities to the detriment of other projects and programmes, including a number of reforms. Over 75 per cent of the Agency's schools continued to work on a double shift, and the Agency was striving to maintain the pace of application of the study plan improvements introduced by the educational authorities in the host country. The deteriorating health situation continued to stretch the health services, while social and relief services, focusing mainly on providing assistance to women, children and the disabled, had seen an increase in the number of people in situations of special hardship.

27. The situation had once again forced the Agency to make emergency appeals to raise funds for its emergency programmes. Without the additional contributions provided by donors, the Agency would have been unable to provide the assistance the refugees needed. The problems caused to the Agency by the Israeli actions should be a cause for concern to the donor community because, in addition to their humanitarian consequences, they have put the Agency under greater financial pressure. That serious problem should be given the attention it deserved. Apart from all its financial problems, the Agency had also faced attacks, pressure, and blackmail from friends of Israel in certain places. This unacceptable and pernicious situation, which was undermining the Agency's work, needed to be brought to an end.

28. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine was grateful to the donor community for their generous response to the emergency appeals. It also thanked donor countries for their contributions to the ordinary UNRWA budget and urged them to increase their funding to enable the Agency to maintain the necessary levels of services in all zones. The Agency's budget covered minimum expenses in relation to the refugees' needs. Moreover, refugees were helping to defray expenses of services through shared payment systems, self-help plans and participation quotas, whenever this was convenient and viable. It was essential to calm the fears of the refugees, who viewed the financial difficulties being faced by the Agency as signs of abandonment by the international community. While waiting for a fair and lasting solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, financial support from the international community was as essential as its political support.

29. The Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine thanked host countries for the attention they had given to the Palestinian refugees for over 55 years, and it urged Jordan, Lebanon and Syria to continue working with UNRWA to facilitate its task. The Mission was also grateful for the enhanced cooperation between UNRWA and other United Nations agencies, and collaboration with humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society.

30. **Mr. Hassan** (Jordan) thanked the UNRWA Commissioner-General for the Agency's annual report (A/5S/13). The Palestinian refugee problem was of the utmost importance to Jordan, for which reason it insisted on the need to reach an agreed solution to the refugee problem in conformity with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and the Arab peace initiative, in order to guarantee Palestinian refugees their right to return, pay them compensation and safeguard the rights of all host countries.

31. Pursuant to the declaration of unity between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the West Bank in 1950, most Palestinian refugees and displaced people living in Jordan were Jordanian nationals, notwithstanding their rights in Palestine, whether legal or historical, which Jordanian nationality in no way annulled.

32. Jordan was home to over 1.7 million UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees, who represented 42.1 per cent of all Palestinian refugees and 90 per cent of all of those displaced in 1967. The Government of Jordan was spending over US$400 million every year to provide them with education, health, infrastructure, social welfare and security services and to improve their conditions of life in 13 camps throughout the country. In 2003, UNRWA had allocated US$72.7 million of its budget to operations in Jordan, while between July 2002 and June 2003 the Government of Jordan had spent US$423.1 million on services for refugees. Accordingly, Jordan appealed to all donor countries to continue contributing to the UNRWA budget, while thanking them for the support provided over a 10-year period; it also thanked the Government

of the United States for its recent donation of US$595,000 to build a new school for Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

33. Israeli practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were obstructing the work of UNRWA personnel. The Commissioner-General's report stated that UNRWA had lost over US$20 million as a result of Israel's continuous closures of Palestinian areas and the imposition of restrictions on free movement within them. Moreover, in contravention of international law and international humanitarian law, Israel was continuing to build the separation barrier in the Palestinian territories, which involved forceful expropriation and annexation of Palestinian land, isolation from Palestinian towns and their installations, and the indirect clearance of towns by creating conditions rendering them uninhabitable, as had happened in Qalqilya. All the hostile measures taken by Israel had merely caused more suffering, despair and frustration to the Palestinian people, undermining trust between the parties, which was currently nonexistent, and fostering radical and extremist movements.

34. With regard to the resolutions concerning UNRWA that the Committee had before it, Jordan wished once again to reaffirm its support to its Palestinian brothers, so that those resolutions would benefit the cause of the Palestinian refugees; and it reiterated its permanent willingness to work with all stakeholders to achieve that objective.

35. **Mr. Assaf** (Lebanon) offered his condolences to the families of UNRWA staff who had lost their lives in the performance of their duties; and he expressed his support to the Commissioner-General in the current difficult circumstances, in which he had been threatened by tanks.

36. The Palestinian refugee problem was not simply a matter of food and housing; for, as Jesus had said, man does not live by bread alone. The refugees also needed freedom, dignity, and especially their land. Numerous resolutions had called for the return of the Palestinian refugees, starting with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), in paragraph 11; Security Council resolution 237 (1967) in paragraph 1; not to mention the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, and General Assembly resolution 273 (III) relating to the admission of Israel as a member of the United Nations, in which the Assembly had also asked Israel to allow the Palestinian refugees to return.

37. The minutes of the session of the Special Political Committee held in 1949 clearly stated that before Israel's admission as a member of the United Nations, the representative of Lebanon had asked the representative of Israel whether the statements made by the Israeli Government and its representatives implied rejection of paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The latter had replied that his Government did not reject that paragraph or any other part of resolution 194 (III). Nonetheless, since Israel had become a member of the United Nations, it had not fulfilled the provisions of the resolution, and today voted against the return of the Palestinians. In essence, therefore, the issue was a legal and political one relating to occupation and international peace and security, which had been assigned to the Special Political Committee because it involved a political matter. If it had been a social issue it would have been assigned to the Third Committee.

38. In addition to attempting to displace Palestinian refugees from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel had started to persecute and assassinate the staff of the Agency created to assist the refugees, as indicated in paragraph 7 of the UNRWA report; destroying its installations and making armed incursions into its offices, as clearly described in paragraph 171 of the report; and seizing the Agency's funds by levying import duties on goods entering the Palestinian territories through Israeli ports. Napoleon had said "Open schools and the prisons will close", but Israel was closing UNRWA schools and turning them into prisons.

39. The Palestinian refugee question was a top priority for Lebanon, whose position was based on three pillars: firstly, the Palestinians themselves refused to remain in Lebanon and wanted to return to their homeland; secondly, the refusal of Palestinian refugees to settle in Lebanon had been registered in the Constitution of Lebanon, and was now one of its articles; and thirdly, the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon exceeded its absorption capacity and was causing a demographic imbalance in the country.

40. Paragraph 38 of the UNRWA report stated that the total sum it allocated to Lebanon was US$50.1 million. As Lebanon had 391,000 Palestinian refugees, expenditure per capita therefore amounted to five cents

per day, and the speaker was grateful to donor countries that were helping to rectify that situation. UNRWA remained a temporary solution for the Palestinian refugee problem; the only permanent solution was to allow them to return to their homeland, for which purpose Agency should continue registering them so that they could maintain their political identity as refugees and their national identity as Palestinians, and be ready for the moment when they could return.

41. **Mr. Rahman** (Bangladesh expressed deep concern at the worsening situation in the Middle East. According to the UNRWA report, over 10,000 Palestinians had been made homeless as a result of housing demolitions since September 2000. The restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities had seriously curtailed Palestinians' freedom of movement and had aggravated their already difficult humanitarian situation. The obstructionist measures detailed in the report were suggestive of calculated attempts to undermine the function and activities of an organization dedicated to a noble and humanitarian mission, in violation of the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention, and the Comay-Michelmore bilateral agreement of 1967 between the Agency and the Government of Israel. Bangladesh reiterated its call for Israel to guarantee unrestricted movement for the Agency's personnel, and refrain from interfering in its activities so that it could fulfil its responsibilities.

42. Bangladesh praised the work of UNRWA and recognized that it had improved coordination of its emergency activities on the ground and its close links with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Agency had extended microfinance and microcredit projects into its zones in Lebanon and Syria following their successful introduction in Gaza and the West Bank; and Bangladesh was willing to share his experiences in that domain with its Palestinian brothers.

43. The survival of the refugees in the occupied Palestinian territories depended crucially on UNRWA continuing to receive support; but Bangladesh was worried that the Agency's financial situation had worsened as the crisis in the Middle East had become deeper. Donor support had declined in 2003, since promised contributions only covered 40 per cent of the amount requested in the first half of the year. Bangladesh asked the international community to increase its contributions to the UNRWA budget at this critical time, because the Palestinians were victims of the worst tragedy that humanity had experienced, and all countries had a moral responsibility to support their cause.

44. Reform and revival were essential, so Bangladesh welcomed the Agency's initiatives to improve its management and its programmes, and encouraged it to persevere with reform to become better equipped to fulfil its mandate. Lastly, Bangladesh wished to express its deepest condolences to the families of UNRWA staff who had given their lives to improve those of the people for whom they were responsible.

45. **Mr. Maalouf** (United States) said that, by its substantial financial contribution to UNRWA, the United States had shown that it had not ceased to support humanitarian relief initiatives on behalf of the Palestinian refugees. In 2002, the United States had contributed US$88 million to the ordinary budget and US$31 million to the emergency appeal. United States, as the principal individual contributor, supported the Agency's mandate and believed that its programme represented a force for stability in the region. Nonetheless, it urgently needed greater financial support, so the speaker encouraged other States to increase their contributions to enable the Agency to fully provide for the needs of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

46. As General Assembly resolutions were much more effective when they were adopted by consensus, the United States deeply regretted the failure to achieve broader consensus on resolutions relating to UNRWA in previous years. The United States wanted to support a resolution on the humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA to the Palestinian refugees, but it had not voted in favour of several resolutions on that subject because it judged that they went beyond purely humanitarian aspects and were drafted in terms that could have repercussions on the peace negotiations in the region.

47. To revive the General Assembly and focus international attention on the financial needs of UNRWA and the assistance needs of the Palestinian refugees, the resolutions of the Fourth Committee needed to be streamlined. During the plenary debates of the General Assembly on reform of the United Nations, the United States had asked the Assembly to speed up the grouping of topics. Nonetheless, while

there were reasons for converting the issue of UNRWA into a triennial topic, the United States was in favour of the Fourth Committee's continuing to consider it annually, at least while the Agency remained in a precarious financial situation, or until a just solution had been found for the refugee problem.

48. The United States hoped that a consolidated resolution would be adopted by consensus, and it believed all parties stood to gain from its proposal — the international community, the United Nations and its reform process, and the Palestinian refugees. Lastly, the speaker reiterated that his Government wanted a two-state solution and remained willing to alleviate the prolonged suffering of the Palestinian refugees.

The meeting was suspended at 5 p.m. and resumed at 5.45 p.m.

49. **Mr. Spatafora** (Italy), speaking on behalf of the European Union; applicant countries Cyprus, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and the Czech Republic; associated countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey; and Iceland which was a member country of the European Free Trade Association which belonged to the European Economic Space, paid tribute to the six UNRWA staff members who had lost their lives in 2003 while performing their duties, and expressed the sincere hope that the Middle East peace process would soon be resumed, in order to provide a fair, stable and equitable solution to the Palestinian refugee problem without delay, in the framework of a definitive agreement on permanent status in conformity with the relevant United Nations resolutions. The services provided by UNRWA had thus far been essential to guarantee a decent life to Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

50. The European Union noted with concern the annual report of the Commissioner-General (A/58/13), which confirmed that refugees, the most vulnerable sector of the Palestinian population, were those that were suffering most from the serious deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank. It was specially concerned about undernutrition and the destruction of housing in the refugee camps, which affected women and children in particular. It was particularly worried about the latter, and the European Union urged the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to do everything possible to provide them with special protection and to guarantee full respect for their rights.

51. The European Union reiterated its opposition to the construction of the Israeli separation barrier in its current form, not only because it represented a violation of international law and endangered the search for a political solution to the conflict, but also because of the dramatic humanitarian consequences it implied for the Palestinian population. The deterioration of the situation on the ground had made it much harder to provide humanitarian assistance and essential services. The European Union once again urged the Israeli Government to allow full, secure and unfettered access to property and international and humanitarian personnel, as demanded by the roadmap, and to respect the provisions and practices of international humanitarian law.

52. The European Union was the main contributor to UNRWA funding, and it stood ready to help it address its growing needs. It urged the Israeli Government to refrain from adopting any measure that would aggravate the already difficult economic and humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people, and to adopt the measures called for in the roadmap, to improve their security and their economic and humanitarian situation, without delay. In 2002, the European Union had contributed over €160 million, and it expected to increase its assistance to the Palestinian refugees throughout the region. It should be noted that the European Commission had provided additional resources for humanitarian assistance, while at the same time maintaining its level of funding for ongoing development programmes.

53. The funding deficit in the emergency appeals was specially worrying, because it threatened to further reduce the provision of assistance at a time when needs were ever greater. In that regard, the European Union supported the Commissioner-General's initiatives to expand the donor community, particularly through increased contributions from Persian Gulf States and other Arab and Islamic countries, and from Islamic financial institutions. It believed alternative funding mechanisms should also be studied.

54. The European Union welcomed the transfer to the Palestinian Authority of VAT and other taxes withheld by Israel, which made it possible to return the amounts owed to UNRWA; and it urged Israel to transfer port duties and all other taxes relating to storage, demurrage and transit, levied on goods destined for the Agency.

55. While acknowledging the central role of UNRWA in the refugee problem, the European Union wanted to highlight the importance of cooperation between the Palestinian Authority, the donor community and the United Nations system in providing assistance to the Palestinian refugees, to achieve a single and consistent approach from the international community at large in dealing with the economic and humanitarian crisis, and to tackle the problems of macroeconomic stabilization, social assistance, the provision of support and rehabilitation. As there were resource constraints, the European Union trusted that programme overlaps would be avoided, in order to respond better to the growing humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people. Lastly, the European Union expressed its full support for the statements made by the United States and Palestine regarding the streamlining of the resolution on the Agency.

56. **Mr. Fallouh** (Syrian Arab Republic) stated that, after more than half a century in which the Middle East had been immersed in the current catastrophe, Syria did not see the slightest hope that the tragedy of the Palestinian people was about to end. Quite the contrary, the occupying power had intensified its vicious terrorist campaign, and was attacking innocent Palestinian civilians. That policy had resulted in a deterioration of health conditions, an increase in poverty and unemployment, and the displacement of thousands of people whose homes had been destroyed.

57. The UNRWA report described the obstacles and constraints faced by the Agency in fulfilling its task, as a result of the policy of confinement and other brutal policies imposed by Israel, which not only had attacked personnel providing humanitarian assistance, but had even assassinated six members of UNRWA. That clearly revealed the terrorist nature of Israel's criminal policies, and constituted a serious violation of the provisions of international law, the Charter of the United Nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations.

58. Palestinian refugees in Syria were treated equally with Syrian citizens, and, despite the enormous financial burden that that implied, all possible assistance was being given to UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees to enable them to lead a decent life until they could return to their homes. As noted in the Commissioner-General's report, the Syrian Government had allocated US$94 million to that task in 2003 alone. The report also mentioned the financial crisis being faced by UNRWA, and in that regard, Syria encouraged donors to increase their contributions to the Agency's budget.

59. The whole international community had a responsibility in relation to the Palestinian refugees, and Syria considered that UNRWA should continue providing services until the situation had been resolved. Syria opposed cutbacks in UNRWA services in any of its fields of operation, and it underlined the importance of its continuing to implement its programmes, including assistance in kind. The Agency should not allow the crisis it was facing to aggravate the financial situation of the Palestinian refugees and the countries that hosted them. The Syrian Arab Republic hoped the Agency would be able to continue its activities in its five current zones of operation, without any discrimination.

60. Sidestepping the gravity of the crisis created by the Palestinian refugee problem throughout the region would hinder the search for a lasting settlement and constitute a violation of international law. Syria considered that the situation created by Israel through its provocations and attacks, which had caused 2,600 Palestinian victims since September 2000, was the result of its vicious policies and clearly showed it was unwilling to achieve a fair and general peace in the region or to recognize the rights of the Palestinian people. Those rights should be based on recognition of the legitimacy and rights of all people, including the right of refugees to return to their land, which the General Assembly had been reaffirming since 1948.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.